

Agriculture attracted settlers to Canastota

By RUSSELL HUBBARD

Canastota

In 1900 no Italians owned muckland. "By 1920, 88 Italians owned farms on the muck with a total acreage of 913 acres," Dorris Lawson wrote in "Italians in Canastota."

The first Italians to purchase muckland paid from \$30 to \$100 an acre; by 1939 nearly all 2,500 available acres were cleared and cultivated. With such a high demand for muckland the price had risen to between \$300 and \$800 an acre.

The average plot of land worked by these farmers was 10 to 11 acres. Carrots, onions, celery were planted. Joseph T. D'Amico noted in "The Italian Farmers of Canastota:"

"There was a time when celery was almost as important a crop as onions, but as the years advanced and growers relied on onions to a greater extent than ever before, there has been a great reduction in the acreage devoted to celery.

"At the present time, though the amount of land devoted to celery is far from the amount given over to onions, it is still without any doubt the second most important crop.

"Lettuce, though not finding as strong a market as in past years, is still grown in large quantities. Carrots and potatoes are also raised to some extent. But as the (Golden Anniversary) Canastota Bee Journal reports, 'the exuberant, odoriferous onion is king'."

Two-thirds of the Italians who settled in Canastota were engaged in agriculture. At the height of the Depression many of them banded together and, on Oct. 28, 1932, established the Canastota Growers Cooperative Association. Lawson noted that while the association's constitution opened membership to any producer on the muck, "members were almost 100 percent Italian-Americans."

The association's constitution (published in 1940) outlined their common goals thus:

"(T)o carry on a general producing, manufacturing, warehousing, and merchandising business on the cooperative plan . . . in articles in common use, including farm products and fruits, meats and dairy products, groceries, food supplies, ice, coal and fuel, farm machinery and supplies, hardware, building material and supplies, furniture and home furnishings and other articles of domestic and personal use."

The association's stock increased greatly. Lawson wrote:

"In 1942, 10 years after organization, the directors reported that the previous year had the highest sales in the history of the organization, \$62,659.78, of which \$50,932.18 had been in the sale of merchandise and supplies and \$11,727 in produce. Dividends (of) \$41,535.55 had been paid over nine years."

The annual business dinner meetings were social affairs long looked forward to. Part of the festivity was the annual selection of an onion queen. The queen represented the Onion Industry Cooperative at the state fair and at other statewide agricultural events each year.

Competition from numerous co-ops and discount firms as well as a loss of members who actively farmed led to the dissolution of the association in 1968. Lawson summed up the role of the association thus:

"(F)or those years of its existence, the cooperative served its members well, giving them opportunities not available elsewhere. During the Depression it was of great help to its members."

Of the one-quarter of Italians not engaged in agriculture, the majority were employed by the railroad. Factory workers and merchants made up the bulk of the remainder, yet some were employed as plumbers, day laborers, painters, salesmen, mechanics, fruit dealers, onion buyers and others.

